

**Before the
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of)	
)	
The Wireline Competition Bureau Seeks)	CC Docket 96-45
Comment on Petitions Concerning)	
Eligible Telecommunications Designations)	
and the Lifeline and Link-Up Universal)	
Service Support Mechanism)	

**COMMENTS OF
TELECOMMUNICATIONS FOR THE DEAF, INC.**

Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc. (“TDI”), in accordance with the Commission’s Public Notice, hereby submits these Comments in support of the Petition of Tracfone Wireless, Inc., CC Docket 96-45, to increase the access of low-income people with disabilities to wireless telecommunications services. In particular, we support the inclusion of wireless providers and resellers as eligible telecommunications carriers (“ETC”) in the Lifeline Universal Service Program for the reasons stated below. Adding these providers and resellers will enable a greater number of qualifying low-income consumers whom are deaf or hearing impaired to reap the significant benefits of wireless telephone services.

TDI is a national advocacy organization that seeks to promote equal access in telecommunications and media for the 28 million Americans who are deaf, hard-of-hearing, late-deafened, or deaf-blind so that they may attain the opportunities and benefits of the telecommunications revolution to which they are entitled.¹ TDI believes that only

¹ TDI educates and encourages consumer involvement regarding legal rights to telecommunications accessibility; provides technical assistance and consultation to industry, associations, and individuals; encourages accessible applications of existing and emerging telecommunications and media technologies in all sectors of the community; advises on and promotes the uniformity of standards for telecommunications technologies; works in collaboration with other disability organizations, government, industry, and

by ensuring equal access for all Americans will society benefit from the myriad skills and talents of persons with disabilities.

In today's rapidly evolving telecommunications marketplace, wireless phone service is for many low income Americans who are deaf or hearing impaired a better option than traditional wireline phone service. Wireless service offers an extra measure of mobility and flexibility, so important to individuals who may otherwise be limited in their daily affairs. This is especially important for individuals who must travel long distances to work and who may not have telephones at their places of employment. These individuals rely on cell phones to keep in touch with their children, with health care providers, schools and emergency services.

That access to wireless services is critically important to deaf and hearing impaired persons been demonstrated to the Commission in a number of proceedings. The first of these was the Commission's E911 proceeding², which resulted in the creation of a consumer-industry forum (the TTY Forum) that worked tirelessly over a period of nearly three years at the turn of the century to find technical solutions to make wireless services compatible with TTYs. The second of these proceedings continues to be the Commission's hearing aid compatibility proceeding,³ which is designed to ensure that

academia; develops and advocates national policies that support accessibility issues; and publishes "The GA-SK" quarterly news magazine* and the annual *Blue Book, TDI National Directory & Resource Guide for Equal Access in Telecommunications and Media for People Who Are Deaf, Late-Deafened, Hard-of-Hearing or Deaf-Blind*.

² *In re Revision of the commission's Rules to Ensure Compatibility with Enhanced 911 Emergency Calling Systems*, CC Docket No. 94-102. TDI has submitted two comments in this docket. See *Joint Comments of Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc. and the National Association of the Deaf* (May 9, 2002); See *Joint Comments of Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc. and the National Association of the Deaf* (Apr. 25, 2002).

³ *In re Section 68.4 (A) of the Commission's Rules Governing Hearing Aid-Compatible Telephones*, WT Docket No. 01-309. TDI has submitted two comments in this docket. See *Comments of Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc.* (Jan. 11, 2002); *Comments of Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc.* (Dec. 8, 2000)

wireless phones are accessible to individuals who use hearing aids or cochlear implants.

A significant number of Americans with disabilities are low income.⁴ Even with passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, it has been difficult for these individuals to secure employment. As a result, many people with disabilities are on SSI and participate in other federal programs that make them eligible for Lifeline participation. For these individuals, access to wireless phone service is not a luxury; it has become a critical necessity. That is why the disability community has vigorously advocated for accessible wireless services and equipment. Phone service cannot only mean the difference between life and death in an emergency; it is an essential tool for independent living. Access to wireless services, such as those described in the Tracfone petition, allows people with disabilities to more fully participate in society while having access to family medical providers and emergency services.

TDI has a strong interest in the availability of wireless products, especially text messaging services. Wireless text messaging service enables persons who are deaf or hearing impaired to communicate with all users of text messaging through wireless services. It creates a readily available mobile service whose use in our society is becoming more prevalent every day. The availability of this service to low-income individuals who are deaf or hearing impaired will be a great benefit to those individuals who otherwise could not afford to purchase this service.

⁴ See McNeil, Jack, *Americans With Disabilities: Household Economic Studies*, Report of the U.S. Census Bureau P70-73, Issued Feb. 2001 (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/disable/sipp/disable97.html>). According to this report, 27.9 percent of Americans with a severe disability are in poverty, 10.4 percent with a non-severe disability are in poverty, and 8.3 percent with no disability are in poverty. The proportion of individuals with an annual personal income less than \$20,000 was 80.2 percent for those with a severe disability as compared with 43.7 percent for those with no disability.

Lifeline was created to ensure that all Americans would have access to telecommunications services. To fully achieve that goal in the twenty-first century, it is no longer enough to have access to wireline services. Rather, low-income people with disabilities should have access to competitive wireless services of all kinds, including the prepaid wireless services described in the Tracfone petition. Prepaid services hold particular promise for low income people because there are no long term contracts that may be difficult to honor, no additional charges for late payment and very often, as set out in the Tracfone petition, these services provide additional benefits like voice mail and long distance at no additional charge.

We believe that expanding the carrier choices for low income people to all carriers that are willing to meet the service requirement – whether wireline and wireless, facilities based and resellers – is in the public interest. This would bring the same choices and consumer benefits to low-income people that are available to all other Americans, and most importantly, lower costs and increase the participation of eligible Americans in the Lifeline Program.

/s/

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